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## The 'Socratic Fallacy' in Plato's Early Dialogues

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## I. Introduction

In 'Plato's *Euthyphro*: An Analysis and Commentary' (33), Peter Geach attributes two assumptions to Socrates which he calls the 'Socratic Fallacy' since its *locus classicus* is the early Socratic dialogues:

(A) if you know you are correctly predicating a given term 'T,' you must 'know what it is to be T' in the sense of being able to give a general criterion for a thing's being T;

(B) it is no use to try and arrive at the meaning of 'T' by giving examples of things that are T.

Geach claims that (B) follows from (A) because assuming (A) is true, one cannot know that an instance of T is really an instance of T unless one *already* knows 'what T is.' Hence, examples will not help in the search for a definition. (A) can also be called 'the priority of definition principle' because it essentially claims that one must know the definition of a term before one can know anything about that term.

The attribution of this 'fallacy' to Socrates has provoked many scholars to come to his defense: Vlastos, Santas, Beversluis, Woodruff, and Nehamas,<sup>1</sup> for instance, deny that the Socratic Fallacy can be found in the dialogues (although they have varying formulations of precisely what it is that Socrates does not say). Most recently, William Prior argues that (A) does in fact occur in the dialogues, but rather than being a fallacy it is 'a perfectly innocent consequence of Platonic epistemology.'<sup>2</sup> That is, *for Plato*, to have 'knowledge' or *episteme* that something is T does require having a correct definition of T. Prior argues that this is a reasonable demand in the case of ethical terms such as 'courage' and 'virtue' and that Geach sees this as a fallacy only because he assumes a Wittgensteinian conception of knowledge in which 'meaning is use.'<sup>3</sup>

I agree with Prior that Socrates does endorse (A) and that (A) is a consequence of Plato's epistemology. But I shall argue that *Socrates'* adoption of (A) leads to problematic consequences which *Plato* cannot accept and which he attempts to evade. Thus I argue for a developmental thesis. In the early dialogues Plato via the character of Socrates makes many claims which together suggest that he holds (A) to be true.<sup>4</sup> At this stage of Plato's philosophical development he cannot successfully define any ethical term T and the consequence of this combined with (A) is that he cannot *know* anything about T. This consequence commits Plato to a serious form of skepticism at this point. In the *Meno*, a transitional dialogue in which Plato's own views begin to replace those of Socrates, Plato still assumes (A) to be true but *Meno's* Paradox (80de) for the first time indicates explicit consciousness of the consequences of (A): how can one even search for something one does not know at all? Plato's response to this question--the doctrine of recollection and then, in the *Phaedo*, the transcendence of the forms--is his way of avoiding the skepticism to which Socrates is committed.

In section II, I shall survey the evidence for (A) in the Socratic dialogues, for I do believe it can be found there, *pace* Vlastos *et al.* Then, in section III, I shall argue that the *Meno* is the precise point at which Plato recognizes the problematic consequences of (A) and offers a multi-dimensional solution to this problem.

## II. The Socratic Fallacy in the Definition Dialogues

The 'Socratic Fallacy' per se consists of both (A) and (B). But my focus is (A) alone, which I shall revise to a more comprehensive formulation: 'to know that ...T--, one must know what the T (T-ness) is.'<sup>5</sup> This includes cases where T is subject, as well as cases where T is predicate; e.g. 'justice is a virtue' and 'to benefit one's friends is just.' I prefer to call this assumption the priority of definition principle (PD), which asserts that 'if one fails to know what T-ness is, then one fails to know anything about T-ness' (Benson's formulation, 19), i.e., knowing the definition of T-ness is a necessary condition for knowing

anything about T-ness. The dialogues which provide evidence for (PD) are *Republic I*, *Charmides*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, and *Hippias Major*.

The first instance of (PD) is *Republic I*, 354bc: 'the result of our discussion for me is that I know nothing; for, when I do not know what justice is, I shall hardly know whether it is a kind of a virtue or not, or whether the just man is unhappy or happy.'<sup>6</sup> This is a fairly explicit statement of (PD). Vlastos, however, claims that 'tacked on at the end of Book I, this cannot belong to the composition which precedes it' (1985, 26, n. 65). He argues that, in 351a, Socrates asserts 'injustice is ignorance' as a conclusion that 'nobody could still not know,' which implies that justice is knowledge, which implies that justice is virtue. But this final conclusion contradicts 354c; therefore the latter must be 'tacked on.' This reasoning is unpersuasive. In 354a-c, Socrates explains his dissatisfaction with the dialogue's results: he begins by inquiring into the nature of justice, but becomes sidetracked by questions about the attributes of justice. 354c shows that he thinks the digression is self-defeating because he cannot know the attributes of justice without first knowing the nature of justice itself. This ending gives *Republic I* the same sort of aporetic conclusion shared by all the Socratic definition dialogues. If the book had ended at 354a, with the total success of proving that justice is more profitable than injustice, then *Republic I* would be very un-Socratic. In short, the ending that Vlastos considers 'tacked on' is very appropriate to and characteristic of the definition dialogues.

Additionally, it makes no sense, as Vlastos argues, for the ending to be tacked on. The only reason a new ending would be added to *Republic I* is to smooth the transition to II-X, which most scholars agree were written during Plato's middle period. But 354bc, with its profession of ignorance and despair at not having a definition of justice, is in direct conflict with the following nine books, where 'Socrates' knows all sorts of things, not the least of which is the definition of justice. Thus, it seems that the instance of (PD) at the close of *Republic I* should be considered genuinely Socratic.

A second, though less explicit, instance of (PD) is *Charmides* 176a. Failing to find an adequate definition of *sophrosune*, temperance, Charmides says at the end:

But heavens, Socrates, I don't know whether I possess it or whether I don't. How can I know it, when, on your own admission, not even you and Critias are able to discover what on earth it is?

Apparently, the point of this is that if one does not know what T is, one cannot even know whether one possesses the quality of T. Vlastos argues that this passage provides no evidence for the Socratic Fallacy because assumption (A) is not asserted 'in full generality,' i.e. it does not say that 'if one does not know the T one can't know if *anything whatever* is T' (1985, 23, n.54).<sup>7</sup> While he is correct that the assumption in its most general form is not asserted in *Charmides* 176a, this criticism is not to the point. Charmides' remark is a manifestation of a larger claim; it is one variation on a Socratic theme. Thus, the absence of the larger claim in a given passage does not prove that the passage is not an instance of that claim.

Beverlysluis, likewise, dismisses 176a as evidence for the Socratic Fallacy because of its lack of generality. He says:

Charmides does not say that without a definition of temperance he cannot know that any actions are temperate but only that he cannot know whether *he* is temperate—a remark which is nothing but a more emphatic reaffirmation of the philosophically and psychologically intimidated state of mind to which he had already given vent at 159d 1-6. (214)

But again, Socrates' expression of (PD) by means of particular instances is no evidence against the claim that he holds the more general assumption. The whole point of calling (PD) an 'assumption' is to indicate that it is largely implicit in the dialogues and only occasionally manifests itself in passages such as those I am now discussing. (PD) itself is, of course, a scholar's explanatory device; Socrates does not run around saying 'you can't know that anything is T unless you know what T is.' Furthermore, Charmides does not strike me as being 'philosophically and psychologically intimidated.' Quite the contrary, Charmides seems well aware of the power of his beauty and openly flirts with the mature Socrates in the closing scene,

playfully threatening violence to make Socrates 'charm' him and telling Socrates not to resist him (176a-d). Although Socrates initiates this flirtation, Charmides' playful response is not consistent with his being psychologically intimidated.

Santas attempts to explain Charmides' question at 176a by appealing to the context in which it occurs:

When his more experienced elders had failed to discover and understand what temperance is, it would have been unseemly and arrogant for Charmides to declare in answer to Socrates' question, 'you two, and I too, do not know what temperance is, but I certainly do know that I am temperate.' (138)

This explanation trivializes Charmides' remark and suggests that while he *does* believe that he possesses the undefined virtue, he refuses to admit it. But perhaps we should take him more seriously. After all, he does agree with Socrates that if *sophrosune* were in him, he should be able to say what it is (159a); so, when he finds himself unable to define it, shouldn't he genuinely wonder whether or not he possesses it?

To the above argument Santas adds, 'And on top of all this, it is to be noted that the question, and the implication that goes with it, is Charmides' in this passage, not Socrates'' (139). True, but these are Plato's words. Charmides' closing remarks at 176ab are the dramatic conclusion of the dialogue. If Socrates disagrees with Charmides' remarks or their implications, surely he would object. Socrates is not reticent when it comes to pointing out others' mistakes. His silence implies agreement. Of course, he has no reason to disagree, for Charmides is expressing a Socratic assumption. The words could have been Socrates' just as well as Charmides'.

A third instance of (PD) occurs in *Laches* 190bc. In the *Laches*, Socrates is inquiring how to make the sons of Lysimachus and Melesias virtuous, but, in order to achieve this, they must first know what virtue is. Socrates asks: 'Then must we not first know the nature of virtue? For how can we advise anyone about the best mode of attaining something of whose nature we are wholly (*to parapan*) ignorant?'<sup>8</sup> This rhetorical question clearly implies that one must know 'what virtue is' before one can determine how to achieve it, which is another particular instance of the assumption that to know that ... T—, one must know what T is.

Vlastos (1985, 23, n.54) and Beversluis (215) again dismiss this passage for its lack of the full generality of (A). But again I must reply that their criticisms are not to the point. *Laches* 190bc does not assert (PD) *per se*, and no one claims that it does so, but it does manifest a particular instance of the assumption. And the sum of the particular instances does seem to suggest a more general viewpoint.<sup>9</sup>

A fourth occurrence of (PD) is at *Lysis* 212a, where Socrates again implies that one must know what T is before one can know how to acquire T: 'I'm so far from acquiring one that I don't even know how one man becomes the friend of another.' And, after failing to define what a friend is, the dialogue concludes with a fifth instance of (PD) when Socrates says:

Lysis and Menexenus, we've now made utter fools of ourselves, an old man like me and you, since these people will go away and say that we think we're friends of one another—for I consider myself one of your number—though we were not as yet able to find out precisely what a friend is. (223b)

This remark implies that one must know what a friend is before one can even be or have a friend. Socrates has made a fool of himself insofar as he does think he is and has a friend but is unable to define a friend; that is, he realizes that he is contradicting (PD).

Vlastos admits that *Lysis* 223b does assert that 'if one does not know what the T is, one cannot know if T is truly predicable of anything whatever' (1985, 23, n.54). (However, this admission seems inconsistent with his *denial* that *Charmides* 176a instantiates (PD), since this passage is merely an instance of (A) as applied to friendship. *Lysis* 223b is more general than *Charmides* 176a, but it certainly is not (A) in its 'full generality'.) But Vlastos argues that Socrates' assertion is either vacuous or false, depending on how we read 'know' (1985, 26). Vlastos attempts to resolve the paradox of Socrates' disavowal of knowledge by proposing a dual use of 'know' in the early dialogues. When Socrates says he does not know

anything, he means that he does not know anything *with certainty*, and Vlastos represents this type of knowledge as 'knowledge<sub>c</sub>.' But when Socrates says or implies that he *does* know something, he means that he has 'elenctically justified true belief' about that thing (i.e. his belief has not yet been elenctically refuted), represented by 'knowledge<sub>e</sub>.' (1985, 18). Socrates does not then contradict himself when he sometimes avows and sometimes disavows knowledge—he is merely using two distinct conceptions of knowledge.

Applying this distinction to assumption (A) (or my (PD)) Vlastos says:

If the question 'is (A) true?' had been put to Socrates in the elenctic dialogues it would have required further specification. He would have needed to be told how he should read 'know' in (A). Should he read it as 'know<sub>c</sub>'? If so, (A) turns into

(A<sub>c</sub>) If one does not know<sub>c</sub> what the T is, one cannot know<sub>c</sub> if T is truly predicable of anything whatever.

Or should he take it in the alternative sense, reading it as

(A<sub>e</sub>) If one does not know<sub>e</sub> what the T is, one cannot know<sub>e</sub> if T is truly predicable of anything whatever.

...For the Socrates of the elenctic dialogues, who has renounced knowledge<sub>c</sub> lock, stock, and barrel, (A<sub>c</sub>) would be *vacuous*: he has no interest in knowing<sub>c</sub> anything... But now suppose, alternatively, that he had read (A) in the sense of (A<sub>e</sub>). In that case he would have declared it *false*. Thus at [*Ap.* 29b 6-7] he 'knows' (=knows<sub>e</sub>) that he can predicate 'evil' and 'base' of 'doing injustice and disobeying his superior', though no definition of either predicate has been assayed and there is no good reason to believe that if it had been it would have met with greater success than had any of those pursued in dialogues of elenctic search...

Thus once the critical verb has been disambiguated, (A) is trouble-free for the Socrates of the elenctic dialogues: innocuous if read as (A<sub>c</sub>), false as (A<sub>e</sub>). (1985, 25-26)

But why would we have to ask Socrates if (A) is true? He asserts it in various formulations, as we have seen, as a truth. Vlastos' 'disambiguation' of the meaning of 'know' does not disprove that Socrates holds assumption (A); Vlastos ends up admitting that (A) is in the text (at least at *Lysis* 223b), but argues that Socrates does not really mean it! That is, since Vlastos claims that Socrates has renounced knowledge<sub>c</sub>, it must be (A<sub>c</sub>) that Socrates asserts in the above-mentioned passages. But Vlastos says that for Socrates (A<sub>c</sub>) would be false. Does this not put Vlastos in the position of making Socrates contradict himself, or assert something he does not mean (the very problem Vlastos' 'disambiguation' purports to solve)? Vlastos' dichotomy may resolve some textual problems and it may even resolve the paradox of Socrates' disavowal of knowledge (although I do not think so<sup>10</sup>). However, Vlastos' application of it to the Socratic Fallacy makes Socrates' assertions of the aforementioned instances of (A) incoherent. Regardless of precisely what sense we give to 'know,' I believe that we should take Socrates more seriously when he asserts (A), instead of trying to explain it away at any cost.

A sixth, and very explicit, assertion of (PD) occurs at the close of *Hippias Major*, after Socrates has failed to define *to kalon*, the fine. He says of his alter-ego:

he asks me if I am not ashamed of my effrontery in discussing fine occupations, when questioning shows how obviously ignorant I am even about what fineness itself is. 'And yet,' he continues, 'how can you know whose speech or other action is finely formed, if you're ignorant about fineness? Don't you think you might as well be dead, in such a condition?' (304de)

The point here is quite obviously that without knowledge of 'what fineness is,' one cannot know whether *anything* is or is not fine. This is (PD) in its full generality. In his commentary on this dialogue, Woodruff states the Socratic Fallacy as 'supposing that a person cannot use a word correctly unless he can define it' (139) and denies that Socrates commits it. He says that *Hippias Major* 304de commits Socrates to

believing that 'knowing the definition of the fine is prior to knowing of anything that it is fine' (140), which is also how I read the passage. But what Woodruff posits as the Socratic Fallacy is a much weaker version of (PD), whereas the thesis he admits *Hippias Major* does assert is an instance of what I am calling (PD). Therefore, Woodruff *does* believe that Socrates holds (PD) in this dialogue. The difference between Woodruff's version of the Socratic Fallacy and (PD) is that between using a term T correctly and *knowing* that ...T—.

Vlastos attempts to dismiss 304de as another instance of (A<sub>e</sub>) which Socrates considers false (1985, 24-26), but as the rebuke is coming from the lips of his alter-ego, Socrates certainly accepts it as true. The final question, in fact, suggests that Socrates (or Plato) is aware of the deadly serious consequences of (PD).<sup>11</sup>

Socrates seems to recognize how problematic (PD) is in that he himself does at times make claims about T without having a definition for it. However, this contradiction is not evidence that Socrates does *not* hold (PD), but rather manifests the difficulties inherent in Socrates' manner of seeking definitions. He believes that all particular instances of T have something in common, some immanent quality, by virtue of which they all are T: this quality is 'the T' or 'T-ness.' His criteria for an adequate definition of the T require that definiens and definiendum be co-extensive. Unfortunately for him, this requirement proves impossible to satisfy (at least for ethical terms; Socrates can define 'shape' and 'color' to his satisfaction, *Meno* 76a-d). So, as long as Socrates holds definitional knowledge to be a necessary condition for knowing that an ethical term applies to any particular case, he cannot know whether or not the term applies. This is of course a difficult predicament to put oneself in, as Plato seems to recognize in the *Meno* (to be addressed below).

The evidence of the passages I have discussed indicates that assumption (PD) can be found in the Socratic dialogues. Much of scholars' criticism against the Socratic Fallacy is really directed against Geach's assumption (B), that 'it is no use to try and arrive at the meaning of "T" by giving examples of things that are T.' Santas, for instance, argues against Socrates' holding assumption (A) primarily by showing that he does not hold (B), which he, following Geach, believes is entailed by (A). But Santas proves that Socrates does not hold (B) merely by indicating his frequent *use* of examples. Santas is perfectly correct that Socrates accepts and uses examples in searching for definitions. Socrates does not object to examples of a definiendum *per se*; he only rejects them as adequate definiens. However, Prior argues persuasively that (A) does *not* entail (B), the claim that it is *no use* trying to find a definition of T by giving examples of things that are T. This is because,

It is a perfectly intelligible procedure, one followed in all forms of classificatory endeavor, to consider many alleged examples of a given term in the hope of coming up with a general criterion or general criteria of classification. Once one has developed or discovered such criteria, one can then use them to sort through the initial set of alleged examples and separate those that truly belong to the class from those that merely appear to. (111)

So considering alleged examples of T *can* be *useful* in discovering the definition of T. However, what (A) *does* entail is that 'one cannot *know* that an alleged example of T is a genuine example' until one knows the definition of T (ibid., 110). And *this is* problematic for Plato.

The problem which Plato via the character of Socrates occasionally seems to notice is that his and others' knowledge claims conflict with his assumption about the priority of definition. Laches says that he likes to hear a man who is in tune with his words, who lives by his principles (*Laches* 188c-e). After several failed attempts to define bravery, Socrates tells Laches that they must not be 'tuned,' because their words and actions do not harmonize:

If people judged us by our actions, they might well say that we had our share of bravery; but to judge from this conversation, I don't think they would if they could hear us discussing it. (193e)

This and similar passages (e.g. *Lysis* 223b, *Hippias Major* 304de) suggest that Socrates is cognizant of a conflict. If he is aware of it, and Plato takes steps in the *Meno* specifically to resolve this conflict, why should we, his readers, be so eager to deny that there is a problem?

### III. The Socratic Fallacy in the *Meno*

Next, I propose to examine the role this assumption plays in the *Meno*, which I take to be transitional between the early dialogues in which Plato reports Socrates' views and method and the middle dialogues in which Plato's own method and metaphysics are voiced through Socrates' persona. (PD) appears to be affirmed several times in the *Meno*, yet after failing to define virtue, Socrates agrees to inquire whether virtue is teachable—a task he is not warranted in attempting if he still holds to (PD)—if he can use a new hypothetical method. Meno's Paradox explicitly confronts us with the consequences of (PD) and Plato's doctrine of recollection is offered as a solution to this problem. Yet another Platonic innovation, the view that true belief alone is sufficient for correct action, and hence for virtue, also seems to address the impasse Socrates finds himself in due to assuming (PD). Thus, the *Meno* simultaneously affirms the priority of definition principle, recognizes its problematic consequences, and offers a multi-dimensional solution.

The *Meno* opens with Socrates ironically praising Meno for his wisdom. Socrates contrasts Meno's teacher, Gorgias, who has a ready answer for any question, with the Athenians as a whole. If any Athenian were asked whether virtue were teachable, he would respond: 'Good stranger, you must think me happy indeed if you think I know whether virtue can be taught or how it comes to be; I am so far from knowing whether virtue can be taught or not that I do not even have any (*to parapan*) knowledge of what virtue itself is' (71a). Although this clear instantiation of (PD) is attributed to the Athenians at large, Socrates immediately claims the assumption for himself:

I myself, Meno, am as poor as my fellow citizens in this matter, and I blame myself for my complete (*to parapan*) ignorance about virtue. If I do not know what something is (*ho ti esti*), how could I know what qualities it possesses (*hopoion ti <esti>*)? Or do you think that someone who does not know at all (*to parapan*) who Meno is could know whether he is good-looking or rich or well-born, or the opposite of these? (71b)

This explicit formulation of (PD)—if one fails to know what T-ness is, then one fails to know anything about T-ness—echoes the occurrences in the earlier dialogues discussed above. What is strikingly new is the explicit and thrice-repeated qualification *to parapan*. This adverb occurs only a few times in the early Socratic dialogues, but nearly 150 times in Plato's later works (most occurrences are in the *Laws*). Interestingly, in the *Laches* passage where (PD) occurs (190bc, discussed above), *to parapan* is used exactly as it is in the *Meno*. Socrates there asks: 'Then must we not first know the nature of virtue? For how can we advise anyone about the best mode of attaining something of whose nature we are wholly (*to parapan*) ignorant?' In more general terms, if one does not know *at all* what the T is, one cannot know *anything at all* about the T's qualities (e.g., whether it is teachable, how to get it for oneself). This is taken quite seriously in the *Laches* and, like all the other early definition dialogues, this one is aporetic. No other occurrence of *to parapan* in the early dialogues (or elsewhere) is used to qualify a knowledge verb as in the *Meno*.

I suggest that Plato repeats this assumption in the early dialogues as an authentically Socratic view, but is by the *Meno* painfully aware of its problematic consequences. So here the view is stated quite self-consciously, the gist of it being that a total, unqualified lack of knowledge of a thing's 'what it is' (*ho ti esti*) results in a total ignorance of that thing's qualities (*hopoion ti esti*). But this suggests that some sort or degree of knowledge of (or acquaintance with, etc.) what a thing is may yield a corresponding degree of knowledge of that thing's qualities. In other words, Plato's set-up of this assumption at the very opening of the *Meno* is deliberate and, while he still accepts the strong form to be true, he is searching for a way around it.

(PD) may occur again at 79c. Meno defines virtue as the acquisition of beautiful things accompanied by justice or some other part of virtue, but Socrates points out that they have made no

progress in defining virtue itself. He asks, 'do you think one knows what a part of virtue is if one does not know virtue itself?' Socrates may simply be indicating the fallacy of circular definition, i.e., that the definiens cannot contain the definiendum. But it may also manifest another occurrence of (PD): one cannot know the 'what it is' of justice unless one knows the 'what it is' of virtue, since justice is a part of virtue.<sup>12</sup>

(PD) comes into play a third time in Meno's Paradox at 80d. After several unsuccessful attempts to define virtue, Meno complains that although he has made many fine speeches about virtue, now he cannot even say what it is--Socrates has transferred his own state of being at a loss or in doubt (*aporein*) to Meno. Yet Socrates still wants to continue the search for 'what virtue is' despite both parties' lack of knowledge. Now Meno objects:

How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all (*to parapan*) what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know <at all><sup>13</sup>? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know? (80d)

Note that *to parapan* recurs here for the fourth time. Socrates restates this paradox:

Do you realize what a debator's argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? He cannot search for what he knows--since he knows it, there is no need to search--nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for. (80d)

This problem seems to be a direct consequence of the priority of definition principle. Socrates' goal is to make men who think they are knowledgeable, recognize that they do not in fact know, thus making them eager to search for knowledge. At this goal, Socrates was successful. But he never actually succeeds in finding the sort of definitions he seeks and perhaps this is unimportant to him. We may never know how skeptical Socrates the man actually was, but the evidence from the early dialogues suggests that, for him, exposing ignorance is much more important than attaining positive knowledge. After recording so many aporetic dialogues, however, Plato seems to tire of Socrates' repeated failures. Perhaps Meno's criticism is really Plato's realization that he will never be able to find the 'what it is' of virtue, justice, beauty, etc., as long as he continues to follow Socrates. Here, in the *Meno*, 'Socrates' escapes Meno's Paradox and the consequences of (PD) by the doctrine of recollection, a Platonic innovation.

Socrates does not deny the truth of Meno's criticism, despite his acknowledgement that the argument does not seem to him to be well-stated (81a). Rather than saying Meno's paradox is false, i.e., just denying it, Socrates offers recollection as a way around it. Socrates affirms as a true conditional that if we have no knowledge of a thing whatsoever, then we can know *nothing* about it (i.e., what sort of thing it is, *hupoion ti esti*), and hence cannot even begin to search for it. But he now, for the first time, denies the antecedent: in a way, we *do* have knowledge. The doctrine of recollection is his attempt to explain in *what* way we have it and how it can be extracted from the soul. If we were dealing with the epistemology of the *Republic*, it would be impossible to know something 'in a way:' there the *only* objects of knowledge are forms and there seems to be only one degree of knowledge of them--either one knows the forms or one does not. Belief, on the other hand, is of the sensible world, which cannot be known (529c), giving us an ontological and epistemological dichotomy. In the *Meno*, however, belief and knowledge are of the same object, the difference is that a true belief which is tied down 'by giving an account of the reason why' becomes known (97e-98a). Hence, in the *Meno*, there are degrees between belief and knowledge.

After explaining to Meno how learning is really recollection, Socrates wants to launch into a second attempt to 'recollect' what virtue is. Meno however insists on inquiring whether virtue is teachable, which is after all his original question. Socrates then seems to affirm (PD) again (the fourth time by my count) when he tells Meno that they should *not* investigate whether virtue is teachable before investigating what virtue is. But he gives in to Meno, saying 'So we must, it appears, inquire into the qualities of something (*poion to esti*, what sort of thing it is) the nature (*ho ti esti*, what it is) of which we do not yet know' (86e). Socrates agrees to do what he really should not do if he can begin the inquiry with a hypothesis. This hypothetical method, which Socrates attributes to the geometers, is new in the dialogues,



and in conjunction with other evidence in the *Meno*, it indicates a radical shift to a mathematical paradigm of investigation.<sup>14</sup> This new method is presented as a direct solution to the problem of seeking that of which one is totally ignorant. After explaining a geometrical example of the hypothetical method, Socrates says, 'So let us speak about virtue also, since (*epeide*) we do not know either what it is (*ho ti esti*) or what qualities it possesses (*hopoion ti esti*) and let us investigate whether it is teachable or not by means of a hypothesis...' (87b). By this method, instead of asking directly whether virtue is teachable (or now, recollectable), they will ask whether virtue is a kind of knowledge: if virtue is knowledge, it can be taught; if not, then not, since only knowledge can be taught (87b-c).

As it turns out, Socrates claims that virtue is not knowledge nor is it teachable. In the course of arguing for this conclusion, Socrates expresses another Platonic innovation: true opinion alone is sufficient for correct action and hence for virtue. The *Meno* concludes with the doctrine that virtue is neither taught, nor a natural endowment, but is a gift from the gods. Not only poets and prophets, but also statesmen are divinely inspired when they utter true opinions but lack *nous* (99b-100b). Socrates mentions no other source of our true opinions. At 85c, the slave boy is said to have true opinions 'in him;' 85e-86a seem to say that since these opinions were not acquired in his present life the boy 'had them and had learned them' at a prior time 'when he was not a human being.' All this suggests that Socrates thinks of true opinions *in general* as divinely bestowed, though divine dispensation may consist of whatever happens to souls between incarnations.<sup>15</sup> The turning of opinion into knowledge, however, is a human activity, achieved by the dialectical process exemplified in Socrates' lesson to the slave boy. This is the process of 'tying down' true opinions by giving an account of the reason why, which, Socrates says, is recollection (98a).

Socrates' closing remarks are again suggestive of (PD). After concluding that virtue is a gift from the gods, he says, 'We shall have clear knowledge of this when, before we investigate how it comes to be present in men, we first try to find out what virtue in itself is' (100b). This is not nearly as strong as (PD) nor as negative. Rather than claim that knowing the 'what it is' is a *necessary condition* for knowing a thing's qualities, Socrates now says that if we search for what virtue is in itself (*auto kath' hauto*), we will affirm what we have already discovered via the hypothetical method. While this still stresses the priority of definition, it no longer *requires* it unconditionally.

#### IV. Conclusion

In the *Meno*, we find Socrates espousing many doctrines unheard of in earlier dialogues. The doctrine of recollection and the immortality of the soul are the centerpiece of the *Phaedo*, but recollection is dropped until a brief recurrence in the *Phaedrus*. The hypothetical method and the mathematical paradigm are most important in the *Republic*, where Plato proposes to define the just man on the hypothesis that he is analogous to a larger entity, the just state. Also vital to the *Republic* is the view that true belief is sufficient for virtue (even craftsmen and soldiers can be virtuous, but only guardians have knowledge), although as noted above, Plato is dualistic in his epistemology and ontology due to his theory of forms. (PD), however, does not recur in any Platonic dialogue (assuming *Republic* I to be early). The abandonment of this assumption coincides with Plato's abandonment of Socratic skepticism and his embracing of his own peculiar dogmatism. The *Meno* records a moment of intellectual turmoil in Plato's thought, when he is pulling away from the Socratic views he has been recording and is struggling to find his own way. In this dialogue, Plato affirms the priority of definition principle as a true conditional (if one has no knowledge whatsoever of 'what a thing is,' then one can know nothing about that thing's qualities) but he now denies the antecedent. Meno's Paradox illustrates the skeptical consequences of (PD) and Plato's new views on recollection, the hypothetical method, and true belief offer a way out of Socratic *aporia*.

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<sup>1</sup> See References.

<sup>2</sup> 'Plato and the "Socratic Fallacy,"' *Phronesis* 43 (1998), 97.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>4</sup> I hold the standard view that in the 'early' dialogues Plato expresses and endorses the views of the historical Socrates. My argument, however, need only assume that the early dialogues express *Plato's* early views, which he amended as his thought developed.

<sup>5</sup> Where '...T--' represents any sentence in which T occurs. 'To know what the T is' consists of having the sort of definitional knowledge that Socrates sought in the definition dialogues.

<sup>6</sup> I use the following translations: G.M.A. Grube's *Republic* and *Meno* (the latter from his *Plato: Five Dialogues*); Benjamin Jowett's *Laches* (from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns); Donald Watt's *Charmides* and *Lysis*, and Robin Waterfield's *Hippias Major* (from *Early Socratic Dialogues*, edited by Trevor J. Saunders).

<sup>7</sup> I change Vlastos' 'F' to 'T' for the sake of consistency within this paper.

<sup>8</sup> The significance of *to parapan* will be discussed in section III.

<sup>9</sup> This is exactly Benson's point in his excellent paper 'The Priority of Definition and the Socratic Elenchus,' 22-44.

<sup>10</sup> See Leshner for a persuasive critique of Vlastos' 'disambiguation,' but he agrees with Vlastos that the Socratic Fallacy (he calls it 'Geach's Paradox') does not occur in the Socratic dialogues. Yonezawa also rejects Vlastos' solution and offers an interesting alternative.

<sup>11</sup> Brickhouse and Smith think this is a hyperbole (29), but it may presage Plato's view in the *Phaedo*: 'wisdom,' true knowledge of things in themselves, can be attained only after the death of the body, which is an impediment to knowledge (66a ff.).

<sup>12</sup> Of course, we should ask how he knows that justice is a part of virtue, since (PD) really commits us to skepticism, but that is another problem.

<sup>13</sup> *to parapan* does not occur here; Grube's translation is a bit misleading.

<sup>14</sup> See Vlastos' 'Elenchus and Mathematics' for a persuasive argument for this claim.

<sup>15</sup> Even if Plato did believe this at the time he wrote the *Meno*, there is no evidence that he had worked out the details. While it may be possible to extract from the *Meno* a fairly clear account of the process of recollecting a piece of knowledge, Plato is very sketchy about what happens before birth.